

Marriage, Discord and Psychological Distress in *Cry, the Peacock*

Sumaira Akhter

PhD Research Scholar

Department of English, University of Kashmir

Contact:-sumairalala@gmail.com,

Introduction

Anita Desai is an Indian novelist and Professor Emeritus, Creative Writing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA. She is known as a novelist, short story writer and also children author. Presently she is working as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature; the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Girton College; Cambridge and Clare Hall, Cambridge. As a writer, three times she has been shortlisted for the Booker Prize. She has received Sahitya Akademi Award in 1978 for her novel, *Fire on the Mountain* and bagged The British Guardian Prize for children's fiction for the novel, *The Village by the Sea*.

Her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) was subsequently followed by *Voices in the City* (1965) and *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* (1971). In the late 1970s, Anita Desai published her critically acclaimed novel *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) that won the National Academy of Letters Award and the Games at Twilight and Other Stories (1978) is her first short story collection. During the 1980s, she enhanced her reputation with the novels *Clear Light of Day* (1980) and *In Custody* (1984), both of which were short-listed for the Booker Prize, England's highest literary award. Anita Desai considers *Clear light of Day* as her most autobiographical work as it is set during her coming of age and also in the same neighborhood in which she grew up. *In Custody* is about an Urdu poet in his declining days that novel was later adapted as a screenplay as a motion picture in 1993. *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), brought her a third nomination for the Booker Prize, and *Diamond Dust: Stories* (2000), her second short story collection, Her novel, the *Zigzag Way* is set in 20th-century Mexico, and the novel appeared in 2004 and her latest collection of short stories, *The Artist of Disappearance* was published in 2011.

Abstract

Anita Desai, in her psychological novels, presents the image of a suffering woman preoccupied with her inner world, her sulking frustration and the storm within; the existential predicament of a woman in a male dominated society. Through such characters, she makes a plea for a better way of life for women. In the present scenario the tiffs and differences among couples have taken a bad shape. The hazards and complexities of this man and woman relationship are very intensely and sensibly portrayed in the novels of Anita Desai. Her focus is on personal struggles and problems of contemporary life that her Indian characters must cope with. She portrays the cultural and social changes that India has undergone during the post-colonial era.

In this paper I will analyse *Cry, the Peacock* as the pioneer of the Psychological novel in Modern Indian English Literature with particular focus on the odds of Married life and the mental anguish. Female characters are dominant in Anita Desai's novels. *Cry, the Peacock* externalizes the interior of *Maya's* psyche with a series of episodes unified together by her. She depicts female characters that live in separate, closed and sequestered world of existential problems and passion with remarkable ease and adorations. All her female characters are obsessed with the idea of death.

Marriage, Discord and Psychological Distress in *Cry, the Peacock*

Anita Desai, in her novels, mainly explores the inner emotional world of women. Very dexterously she has revealed a rare imaginative awareness of different deep forces which work, thus building up a profound understanding of feminine sensibility and psychology. Her novels voice the silent miseries, pain, agony and helplessness of married women who are tormented by day to day problems. Anita Desai does not only project the problems but very silently makes the analysis of the situation thus simplifying it for the reader to reach the crux of the problem. The recurring theme in her novels is the trauma of existence; therefore the protagonist is in search of identity, in hostile male dominated conservative society. Anita Desai portrays the inner conflicts of her protagonists and also highlights their individuality and hunger for freedom. Her approach is always that of a person who is sensitive towards feminism. She has paved the way for new facets in the world of India English Fiction by shifting the emphasis from the external to the internal world. In *Cry, the Peacock* Anita Desai externalizes the interior of *Maya's* psyche with a series of unified

episodes that we feel the pain with her. She is keenly interested in the inner struggles and mental torments of her protagonists. She provides sufficient reasons for odd or extreme behaviour of her characters and thus makes the reader well aware of the reasons of conflict. Her novels delineate the inner lives of hypersensitive women who are in eternal quest for meaning of life. Her protagonists are rebels who question relentlessly and their limitations bring them fresh pain. Past becomes a source of consolation, for the present offers no hope to them. Her central theme of novels is the existential predicament of an individual projected through incompatible couples, very sensitive wives and ill-matched husbands.

In *Cry, the Peacock*, (1963) the protagonist *Maya* faces crucial identity crises emerging due to some inter-related factors. She is a passionate and sensitive young girl married to a lawyer, *Gautama* who is totally indifferent towards her love yearning. *Gautama* being a practical minded rational person is detached from emotions and empathetical attitude but *Maya* is totally antithetical to him. She is a young girl who is possessed by a childhood prophecy of death that can't be averted. *Maya* is hypersensitive and longs for a love partner with deep sympathies, highly sensitive and responsive qualities which *Gautama* lacks. She has had a chaotic childhood due to her mother's death and a prophecy made by the sooth-sayer/ astrologer. *Gautama's* family is logical and rational and his cold and insensitive attitude leaves her heart broken and her dreams shattered. *Maya* suffers more because of her own consciousness and her inability to outgrow her romantic and protected childhood. She finds herself totally alone and helpless in her husband's house where there is a different code of conduct and set of restriction. *Maya* says in the novel, "*There was no bond, no love- hardly any love*" in her marriage. She is neither able to get company from *Gautama* nor the physical satisfaction. Her involvement and emotional connectivity is opposed to *Gautama's* philosophy of detachment. In her agony of not receiving her husband's attention she sulks and gradually sinks deep into depression and in this fit of neurotic breakdown kills him and very agonizingly subsides back to her childhood memories and fantasies. Trying to find solace in her childhood memories and fantasies, she once again becomes the victim of seclusion and alienation and later commits suicide. The myth about the peacock's cry is related with the theme of the novel. It is said that the peacock's fight ferociously with each other before they mate. "*Living these peacocks are aware of death; and dying, they are in love with life.*" They even tear the breasts of each other violently in extreme excitement. Here Anita Desai successfully penetrates into the consciousness and

psychic state of Maya caused by the gloomy thoughts of death and records them with subtle truth. Thus, in the character of *Maya*, Anita Desai has presented the feminine psyche of a woman before marriage and then after marriage.

Anita Desai is the most important feminist writer who sets her novels apart because of her unique style of writing. In *Cry, the Peacock* she articulates an “autonomous female aesthetic” whereby the traditional roles assigned to woman are rejected in favour of the portrayal of women as individual in her own right. Complex woman characters are represented as individuals who do not agree to masculine mediation. Marriage is viewed with suspicion as a patriarchal social institution which destroys souls and thus is seen as a suppressive force.

Desai critiques the Indian matrimonial alliances which are often projected as love-less and soul-less. She represents it through her female protagonists like Maya who are offered as a sacrifice at the altar of marriage.

All marriages in Anita Desai's novels are more or less business transactions. A marriageable daughter is handed over to the male partner without considering the delicacy of her mind and feelings. She has to fulfill either the parent's responsibilities or the relative's demands with different intentions. (P F Patil)

Marriage in Anita Desai's novel never leads to consummate relationship rather the women feel trapped in this sterile, meaningless encounter. The failure of the Maya-Gautama alliance /marriage is highlighted constantly throughout the narrative.

Maya wishes for a union that would go beyond the physical. She dreams for a life-defining relationship with Gautama which tragically however becomes life denying force for both of them. Maya within four years of married life transforms from a pampered, hypersensitive girl into a neurotic, homicidal-maniac due to the compromises she has to make in order to keep the marriage working which ironically was doomed to fail. Desai's protagonist has a keen introspective mind and this actually compounds her problems. Maya is not an average or ordinary person but a person who undertakes an isolated journey towards self-realisation— unlike the woman who follow the crowd like Leila and Pom.

The temperamental incompatibility between Maya and Gautama is explained by Anita Desai at every step in the novel- through comments, images and symbols. Anita Desai states the futility of this misalliance between Maya and Gautama.

“The incompatibility of character stands revealed—Gautama who touches without feeling and Maya on the other hand who feels without even touching”(Belliappa,Meena).

Anita Desai through a dialectic of images depicts the struggles of an alienated self. Mayas journey into madness is conveyed through images of-- the lizards, snakes, bears, rats, the drums, the albino, the Opaque eyes, the Kathakali dancers, the moon and especially the peacocks. Anita Desai successfully lays bare a state of mind through the use of concrete images. Imagery here becomes an objective co-relative to the happenings in Mayas mind. *Cry, the Peacock* with numerous images illuminates the dark and shadowy realms of Mayas consciousness and her deteriorating psychic states. The images become feverish when novel is drawing to a close and Maya is slipping into insanity. The image of the peacocks- their dance of death- articulates Mayas anguish fully. The “cry “of the peacock becomes Mayas shriek of loneliness and desolation which also hints at her sensual desires which she finds absent in Gautama. *Cry, the Peacock* delineates the psychological problems of an alienated person. From a feminist point of view Maya is the archetypal woman who is antithetical to the male version of life and relationships. The novelist expels the male figures at the end and makes them redundant to lend meaning to the female existence in order to preserve it.

The English novelists before Anita Desai have studied man and his world in relation to the exterior or surface social realities only.

Anita Desai's portrayal of man-woman relationship has been influenced and conditioned by the existing intricate social situations. She concentrates on the predicament of modern woman in this male dominated society and her destruction due to this business transaction called marriage. Therefore her focus remains on the internal and negative psychological results of the troubled man-woman relationships. According to her, most of the marriages are the unions of incompatibility. Men are apt to be rational and practical whereas women are sentimental and emotional. She is preoccupied with the theme of incompatible marital couples. Usha Pathania's remarks, “*Martial Relationships is established with explicit purpose of providing companionship to each other. However, the element of companionship is sadly missing in the relationship between Maya and Gautama*”.

She wants the feeling prevail that life is much more than food, sex and money needs. Desai's protagonist like today's modern woman wants to explore her marital relationship in a quest to seek meaning in her life. What actually Anita Desai wants to say through this novel and the character of Maya is that ground work should be implemented force fully with positive approach as a step towards making marriage a sustainable institution within society. The effort is to be made by both the partners, because practically speaking the 'burden of marriage' weighs much more heavily upon woman than upon man. The relationship in marriage loses its sanctity the moment it become passionless and mechanical as in the case of Maya.

Anita Desai suggests that a balance between the conventional pre-set role of women and contemporary issues have to be re-structured. It is because of 'marriage' that a kind of social order is maintained in the society, absence of which can lead to sexual anarchy and disorder in the family and society at large. As broken -marriages and shattered lives of separated husband-wife and their children present a miserable picture full of pain, suffering and disorder. The present and the future generation need to mend their ways and give a serious thought to understand the need of a stable social set up that is possible if there are healthy, happy and contended families which shall build up a congenial atmosphere for ages to come.

Conclusion

In all her novels, Desai has proved herself as novelist who gives importance for the sensibility of her female protagonists. Through her protagonists she has given life for her major theme which is the exploration of the inner psyche of the women within Indian society. Desai is an explorer of the feminine sensibility. She is excellent in depicting the inner furies of women and the rising call for emancipation and empowerment.

A critical study of the fictional art of Anita Desai through *Cry, the Peacock* confirms the fact that Desai, unlike her predecessors, does not cope with the traditional pattern. She basically involves herself creatively in communicating her concern with the routine of life and with the predicament of human relationship on the basis of the psychic realities of mankind. She features sensitivity of Hindu women of orthodox background seeking unorthodox means of fulfillment that lead to despair and insanity. She also deals with claustrophobia of middle class Indian women's life that finds expression in her other novels too. The main idea behind this paper is to highlight how Anita Desai's Maya even today

after fifty years of the publication of this novel remains an apt figure to represent the mental agonies of woman living in orthodox settings of a patriarchal system. Anita Desai though delving into the mental recesses of Maya's agonized self is actually deliberating upon a problem which is also an outward reality and has a concrete base within a major social institution and that is marriage.

References

1. Belliappa, Meena. "Anita Desai: A Study of her Fiction" (Calcutta: Writers' Workshop, 1971).
2. Desai, Anita. *Cry, the Peacock*. New Delhi: Orient Paperback, 1980.
3. Patil, P. F. The Theme of Marital Disharmony in the Novels of Anita Desai; Indian Women Novelists. Ed. R K Dhawan. Prestige Books. 1991.
4. Pathania, Usha. *Human Bond and Bondage. The fiction of Anita Desai and Kamla Markandeye*. Delhi :Kanishka Publishing House, 1992.